

To tame the

SPOILED MISTRESSES

would take getting past the skeptics. In the years following 1946, Congress began doling out funds for work on some dams in the system that included flood control, but the navigation parts of the system were conspicuously skipped over.

Both within and without the Corps, commitment to the project was far from unanimous.

Settle reports that some highly placed engineers in the Corps were skeptical — to put it mildly — about the technical and marginal economic feasibility of the navigation project.

This would not be an ordinary engineering project. It would be the largest the Corps had ever done, maybe the largest anywhere. And technical problems loomed large. The kindest thing to say about the Arkansas River was that it was unstable.

“The Arkansas River and its tributaries were like spoiled mistresses, given to fits of uncontrollable rage and prolonged spells of stubborn torpidity,” wrote Jim Henderson in a special issue of *Tulsa Magazine*.³

“Especially was the Verdigris an unlikely channel for marine traffic. One day you could walk across its bed without getting your socks wet, the next day it would burst from its banks and flood the farmlands and towns.”

It was true that overnight the Arkansas could change from a trickle to a torrent. At flood tide, the banks of the river could wander as much as 1,000 feet from side to side, chewing up bank stabilization devices and spewing their remains downstream. Even worse, the very bed of the river was a roller-coaster of shifting, shoaling sand. During a typical year, it carried 100 million tons of sediment past Little Rock. This monumental gift from nature would have to be somehow contained, then continually dredged to create and maintain a barge channel.

Furthermore, the steep Arkansas River valley rises an average of a foot a mile. By comparison, when traveling upstream on the Mississippi from New Orleans, a barge rises only 100 feet in the first 500 miles. But the Arkansas River waterway is a steeper climb, rising 420 feet in its 445-mile length. To reach Catoosa, barges would in essence have to climb a water staircase 445 miles long and 420 feet high. This would require 17 expensive locks and dams.

“This was the last undeveloped inland waterway in the country and it was undeveloped for good reason,” Henderson wrote. “No one — almost no one — believed it could be done, not at a reasonable cost anyway.”



Some flooding problems in the 1940s and 1950s seemed to get worse every year and pointed up the need for coordinated, comprehensive water resource development in the District.